DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 154 PS 018 400

AUTHOR Betsalel-Presser, Raquel; And Others
TITLE Child Care Quality and Children's Transition to Kindergarten. Research Bulletins, 1989-90, Vol. VIII, No. 009.
INSTITUTION Concordia Univ., Montreal (Quebec). Centre for Research in Human Development.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 25p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Quality; Elementary Education; *Kindergarten; *School Readiness; Social Cognition; Student Characteristics; *Student Development; *Student Experience

ABSTRACT

This report investigates the relationship between child care quality and children's transition into kindergarten. It focuses on four issues: (1) the definition and measurement of child care quality in group settings; (2) the relationship between child care quality and child development; (3) the relationship between child care quality and transition to school; and (4) teachers' perceptions of the day care child's transition to kindergarten. Transition from day care to kindergarten depends on the continuity among the environments that preschoolers are exposed to during childhood. High-quality day care experience may facilitate transition, while low-quality day care experience may prepare the child to anticipate a similar experience in kindergarten and thus give the child a negative attitude towards school learning. Includes a list of 38 references. (RJC)

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Child Care Quality and Children's Transition To Kindergarten

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**Research Bulletins, 1989-90 Vol. VIII, No. 009

PS 018400

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**The authors wish to acknowledge the support from FCAR (MEQ) and SSHRC/CRSH for several of their research studies summarized in this chapter.

This article is currently under review for inclusion in Doxey, I. (Ed). Care and education of young Canadian children. Toronto, Ontario: Nelson. Please do not cite.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of children attending child care prior to kindergarten has had an effect on the kindergarten environment. As the quality of these child care services is not uniform, the kindergarten teacher is faced with a heterogeneous group of children who have had varied preschool experiences and exposures. New longitudinal studies are beginning to offer insight into the impact of child care quality on the child's transition to kindergarten and suggest that child care, particularly high quality care may facilitate this transition.

Several problems make the study of child care quality and transition to kindergarten difficult. In Quebec, the problem of transition is complicated by the diversity of child care services offered and by the structural governmental provisions that favor parallel roles and responsibilities for the care and education of children. Most of Quebec's schools offer a half day kindergarten program for five year olds, which is sponsored and supervised by the Ministry of Education. Special half-day programs for four year olds and extended (full day) kindergarten programs for five year olds are available to some children identified as underprivileged. However, the Quebec Ministry for the Status of Women, through its Office des services de garde à l'enfance (Child Care Services Bureau) licenses and supervises many different forms of full and part time day care for children between 0 and 12 years.

The child care programs recognized by provincial legislation are: day care centres; family day care agencies; school based day care; nursery schools (jardin d'enfants); and part time care (halte-garderie).

The artificial division between care and education may affect transition and adjustment to kindergarten particularly when children have attended preschool programs which vary widely in their goals, methods and philosophies. Those which offer high quality, developmentally appropriate programs create a situation which requires the kindergarten teacher to restructure her program plans in order to offer these experienced preschoolers new and different stimulating activities. This diversity can create a difficult classroom situation in which the teacher must plan for those who have had high or low quality preschool experiences and those who have had none at all.

Therefore, this chapter will address four issues : (1) the definition and measurement of child care quality in group settings (2) the relationship between child care quality and child development; (3) the relationship between child care quality and transition to school and (4) teacher's perceptions of the day care child's transition to kindergarten.

1) The definition and measurement of child care quality

For the past two decades studies have persistently shown the crucial influence of early experiences (Mc Vicker Hunt, 1961; Belsky and Steinberg, 1979; Clarke-Stewart and Fein, 1983) and they have therefore empowered child care programs with an important mission for

achieving quality services. The aspects that determine the ecology of each day care have been studied by researchers both in Canada and in the U.S. (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979; Cloutier & Tessier, 1981; Goelman and Pence, 1985). While some researchers became interested in the type of organization and the nature of interpersonal relationships, others have looked at the activities and the kind of program developed. The differences observed among the environments have resulted in the establishment of certain quality criteria, while stressing the fact that these differences demonstrate the complexity associated with child care environments and their multidimensional and varied contexts (Clarke-Stewart & Gruber, 1984). It is important to emphasize that the parameters that define each milieu are numerous, and that they reflect a reciprocal influence upon each other, so if they are taken as isolated elements they fail to become a quality factor per se. (Caldwell & Freyer, 1982; Comité de la Santé Mentale du Québec, 1983; Goelman & Pence, 1985; Cooke et al., 1986).

Quality generally refers to those aspects of child care environments which are associated with positive developmental outcomes in children. Any viable child care system must answer the needs of children of different ages, sexes, and family backgrounds. However, even though the system must be flexible, there is considerable consensus in the literature with regard to organizational characteristics thought to be related to high quality in group day care environments. The National Day Care Study, carried out in 67 urban child care centers in the United States in the late 1970s examined structural characteristics such as caregiver training, group size,

adult:child ratio and resource availability on caregiver and child behavior and children's cognitive test performance (Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, & Coelen, 1979). Findings of this study support the relationship of such variables to positive developmental outcomes. Other research has indicated staff stability is also an important variable related to development, particularly in infants and toddlers (Phillips & Howes, 1987).

Kontos & Stevens (1985) sought a definition of quality which went beyond reliance on structural features and reflected the multidimensional nature of this construct. These researchers emphasized the idea that numerous variables define each child care milieu and exert a reciprocal influence upon one another. They argued that a global measure of quality might best reflect its multidimensional nature, and suggested that the Harms & Clifford Early Childhood Rating Scale (ECERS) (1980) was well suited for this purpose.

The ECERS scale is composed of 37 items, tapping seven areas: personal care routines, furnishings and display, language/reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, social development and adult needs. Each item can be rated on a scale from 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent). Four ratings: inadequate, minimal, good, and excellent quality care are possible using the ECERS. Harms & Clifford (1980) demonstrated that this scale has good inter-rater and good internal reliability. Recent data collected as part of the National Child Care Staffing Study indicates that global ECERS ratings are positively related to structural dimensions such as adult: child ratio in the day care setting (Phillips, 1989).

In summary, the ECERS provides researchers with a global, multidimensional scale which seems a valid, reliable index of organizational structures, teacher-child interactions, resources, curriculum, and parent-teacher interactions and their complex interrelationships. The research to be reviewed in this section has relied on this scale to assess day care quality. Thus, although the research was carried out in different milieu, some common definition of day care quality allows us to compare and integrate the results of the studies.

2) Relationship between child care quality and child development

Prior to the introduction of the construct of environmental quality, day care research focussed upon comparing children in day care centers and children reared at home. Peaslee's (1977) study indicated that home reared children scored higher than their day care peers matched on age, sex, race, SES and family structure whereas studies by Cochran (1977) and Kagan et al. (1977) indicated that there were no differences between the day care and home reared groups. While comparing various types of care, Winett et al. (1977) noticed no overall differences in language measures between children in day care and peers in their family. Results from the New York City Day Care study (Medical & Health Research Association, 1979) indicate higher scores for the day care children than their home reared peers on standardized tests, but no difference in language use from a naturalistic observation scale. Rubenstein et al. (1981) used three different measures to compare language in day care and home reared

children. They found no differences on one measure, but obtained higher scores from the day care children on the two other measures. As well, Baillargeon et al., (1989) found that day care children scored higher than non day care children on receptive language, but similarly on expressive language.

When such comparisons are made, day care children are found to show no deleterious effects on language, intellectual or social development. In fact, in some of the studies cited, day care children outperformed home reared children. Differences in the quality of the day care setting and the socioeconomic status of the children may help explain the varied results. As Belsky and Steinberg (1979) point out, most of these studies were conducted in university based centers, which may well have been high quality settings. These reviewers suggest that low quality day care may have negative effects on young children whereas excellent quality day care may well have salutary effects on development. Quality may be particularly important for children of low socioeconomic status.

More recent research has taken quality into account in trying to determine the effects of day care on child development. Several studies have used the Harms & Clifford scale as a measure of quality and have investigated the relationship of group day care quality to children's development. These studies have investigated language development, intellectual and social functioning. In general these studies offer support for the relationship of high quality day care to positive developmental outcomes.

The original study was carried out in Bermuda where socioeconomic status was unrelated to day care quality selected by parents (McCartney, Scarr, Philipps, Grajek, & Schwarz, 1982). These investigators found that children attending higher quality centers had higher scores on measures of language development and were rated by their teachers as more social and considerate.

Further investigations of language development have supported these original findings. McCartney (1984) found that high quality centers (as rated by the ECERS) were characterized by caregivers who used a low proportion of control statements, gave children information, and encouraged them to respond, initiate conversations, and converse. These children fared better than children in low quality centers on tests of language development. Schliecker, White & Jacobs (1988) used the ECERS to rate quality of day care centers in Montreal. Attendance at excellent quality day care was related to higher vocabulary test scores than attendance at low quality centers.

Language is closely related to other fundamental aspects of human development, such as emotional, social and cognitive development. It is tightly linked with thinking and learning. It plays a crucial role in expressing one's emotions and in controlling the self and others. Thus, verbal interactions are an important part of social relationships since many of the social behavior roles are related to language and are learned through it.

During childhood, socialization occurs through numerous interactions of the child with people around him/her. This process is closely related to verbal communication. Group situations seem

propitious to such exchanges. Research indicates that verbal interactions with adults are beneficial to language development. However, studies of social interactions in day care indicate that children tend to interact more with peers than with adults. Thus the need for personalized adult/child relationships has to be underlined. Day care appears to be a rich resource for the development of language usage and social skills due to the situations and social contexts.

Day care introduces a growing number of children to the social mainstream. Many children from immigrant families and linguistic minorities have their first contact with the social majority in day care. This confers a socializing role that other social agents, especially school, henceforth have to recognize and share with day care.

Day care quality has also been related to social functioning in preschool children. In addition to McCartney et al. (1982), White, Jacobs & Schlieker (1988) found that attendance at excellent quality day care centers was related to peer play patterns which included more positive, verbal social interactions with peers, fewer negative interactions, and less teacher directed parallel activity. The caregivers in the low quality settings organized play situations so that cooperative or interactive play was difficult to achieve. In one setting, children were assigned seats and play items during each "free play" period.

There is little doubt that quality of day care experience may influence the competence of the child who comes to kindergarten. Positive developmental outcomes in intellectual, language, and social

domains all seem to be related to higher quality day care. What is more, these skills may be related to one another. For example, good language skills may be essential to social competence. Children with good language skills are aided in the practice of social skills essential for successful entry into ongoing groups and maintenance of their inclusion in the group once entry has been effected (Putallaz, 1983). The myth of the "day care child" characterized by excessive independence (Baillargeon & Betsalel-Presser, 1988), aggression (Schwarz, Strickland, & Krolick, 1974) and egocentrism and lack of consideration for others (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978) seems to be an overgeneralization. It is not day care attendance per se, but quality of the day care environment which seems to be related to competence of the child who enters kindergarten. Similarly, home environments differ and quality of home care may also affect children's competence. Such factors make it imperative to longitudinally follow children from a variety of day care and home backgrounds to kindergarten and to investigate the transition to kindergarten as a function of quality.

3) The relationship between child care quality and transition to school

Longitudinal research makes it possible to follow the child in his/her transition from a day care experience through the early school years.

There are few longitudinal studies available which take day care quality into account. Originally studies in this area were based upon a view of the "day care child" which did not specifically measure quality. For example, Haskins (1985) conducted a longitudinal study of

59 children who had experienced "varying types of day care" for differing periods of time. He followed these subjects for the first 2 to 3 years of grade school. Haskins found a positive relationship between aggressive behavior and a cognitively oriented day care program attended from infancy, though he notes that the aggressive behavior is attenuated over time. Baillargeon & Betsalel-Presser (1988) found that teachers reported that "day care children" had difficulty respecting the classroom rules, were aggressive, and had a tendency to form cliques. These teachers did qualify their views by indicating that the type of day care and family background of the child contributed to such behaviors. Nonetheless, a somewhat negative view of "the day care child" emerges from these studies.

Longitudinal studies which measured quality have found somewhat different results, which are more in keeping with the positive view of the child attending high quality day care. Vandell, Henderson & Wilson (1988) studied the social behavior of 8 year old children who had previously attended day care that was rated as either high or low in quality. The good quality centers had better trained teachers, materials, and adult-child ratios, lower enrollments, and smaller classes. Conversely, the poorer quality programs were characterized by larger enrollments, less teacher training, poorer adult: child ratios and fewer materials. The children in this study were observed in a triadic play session in a laboratory setting. The results of this study indicate that children from high quality day care had more friendly interactions, were rated as more socially competent and happier, and received fewer shy nominations from peers. Thus, high quality preschool

child care was related to more positive social behaviors at 8 years of age.

In the one longitudinal study to date in which the ECERS was used to rate preschool environmental quality, Jacobs, Nathan & Watkins (1989) used the Social Competence Scale (Kohn, Parnes & Rosman, 1976) to assess interest/participation and cooperation/compliance in kindergarten children who had attended excellent versus low quality child care. These investigators also included a control group who had not experienced day care. Their results indicated that high quality day care was related to greater interest and participation in the kindergarten classroom. No differences were found in cooperation/compliance (versus anger/defiance) among the three groups.

Although more research is needed, several tentative conclusions seem warranted. First, quality is an important consideration in describing the preschool day care experience. Secondly, quality of the child care experience affects development in kindergarten and the early elementary years. Finally, several of our ideas about day care children may require revision. Based upon teacher reports (Baillargeon & Betsalel-Presser, 1988), it had been expected that children who had not attended day care prior to kindergarten would display more interest and participation in activities than day care children who had "done it all before". This was not the case. Teachers rated children from high quality centers as displaying more interest and participation in the classroom. Furthermore, based upon research indicating that low quality child care is more structured (White et al., 1988) and that caregivers are more restrictive and controlling (McCartney, 1984), greater

compliance was expected from children who attended these centers. The results did not confirm this expectation. The authors suggest that both these findings might be related to the type of kindergarten classrooms in the study by Jacobs et al. (1989). These classrooms were similar to the high quality day care settings. There were special interest areas, sand tables, blocks, reading areas, materials for dramatic play, and extensive art supplies. The majority of the teachers were warm and friendly and encouraged conversations with groups of children and individuals throughout the half-day period. Thus, children who had attended high qualify centers entered an environment with which they were familiar, but which offered sufficent challenge to maintain their interest. On the other hand, children from low quality day care centers who had experienced many restrictions and a high degree of care giver control, found themselves in an environment with different rules and expectations. This new found freedom may have tempted them to "flex their muscles" and experiment with the rules.

As can be discerned from the discussion of the effect of quality child care programs upon the transition to early school years, the selection of a high quality child care environment is of great importance. However, one variable which must be considered in this selection of quality care is the socioeconomic status (SES) of the parents. The North American studies of quality which have been reviewed in this chapter indicate that the quality of day care is related to SES. That is, children from high SES families tend to be in good or excellent quality child care, while children from low SES families tend to be in minimal or inadequte care. (Parent & White, 1989). This fact

is often referred to as parental "selection" of day care, although availability in particular geographic locations may have more to do with placement than selection. Parent & White (1989) rated 15 of 17 day care centers in 3 working-middle class areas of Montreal and found that of the 15 centers, none were rated as inadequate, 6 were rated as minimal, 9 as good, and none as excellent on the ECERS. Thus, parents' choice was restricted by the absence of excellent care as well as the absence of inadequate care. When there was only good or minimal care to "choose" between, the overwhelming majority of high SES children were in good care. Low SES families, who reported needing centers open for longer or more unusual hours, and for whom cost of care was an important factor, were more likely to have children in centers rated as minimal.

Phillips (1989) reported that many U.S. children were attending centers rated inadequate on the ECERS. Moreover, Howes & Olenick (1986) observed that children enrolled in low quality day care centers had families with more complex and stressful lives. Schliecker et al., (1988) noted that single parent, mother headed families often used low quality day care. It would seem that family and child care situations may interact to widen the developmental differences among children.

In addition, the child, his family and the communities, both dominant and minority, may have divergent interests which must be reconciled. In big Canadian urban areas, this is one of the important challenges that day care and school environments must address. The interests, needs and experiences of this heterogenous population must

be taken into account in order to facilitate transition from the child care setting to the early school experience.

4) Teacher's perceptions of the day care child's transition to kindergarten

Several studies have stressed the role played by adults' perceptions as related to the quality of their interaction with children. (Dickinson, 1987; Kontos and Stremmel, 1988). In an attempt to obtain information regarding kindergarten teacher's perceptions of day care children, a study was conducted with French speaking kindergarten teachers from the Montreal and Quebec city areas. (Betsalel-Presser, Lavoie and Jacques 1989; Baillargeon and Betsalel-Presser, 1988; Betsalel-Presser, Jacques & Lavoie, 1989). Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire which addressed issues related to kindergarten adaptation and social competence for children attending or having attended a day care program.

The results suggest that teachers perceive these children as being able to adapt to the new environment, with some difficulty. On the one hand, teachers feel that children manifest an interest in the teacher initiated activities, but on the other hand, children prefer those activities related to creativity, such as dramatic play, arts and crafts, block building, pottery and music. The least popular activities were the ones associated with formal learning.

As for the children's ability to concentrate, the results indicated that the teachers perceived a difference between the children's concentration skills when they were faced with organized as

opposed to free activities. This difference suggests that attention span depends on the nature of the activities performed by the child and the appeal of some of these activities and is not associated with poor concentration skills in general. Although more than half of the teachers supported the idea that the day care child shifted quickly from one free activity to another, they were not ready to conclude that these children had difficulty fixing their attention, even if a majority of the teachers noted that they had to remind these children to finish their task more often when compared to non day care children.

The teachers were asked to express their opinion about the children's attitudes towards classroom instructions and discipline. A large majority of teachers were quite negative about this issue. They indicated that the day care child lacks discipline, does not automatically respect the class rules and challenges the teacher by creating his/her own set of rules. Teachers seem to resent being forced to repeat and remind children frequently of rules. They considered their work to have become more difficult due to this kind of behavior. However, a small percentage of teachers commented favorably on the idea that these children tend to respect the rules sooner than the home reared children, since they have already been exposed to rules in previous child care experiences. It is then pertinent to question whether the discipline disturbances pointed out by teachers may be principally attributed to the day care experience or whether the ecology of the living context, such as early morning departure from home, exposure to more than one rearing environment, the change of nurturing agents, and their personal family structure may play a large

part in such behaviors. For instance,a third of the teachers noticed that children arrived at school feeling tired after having spent part of the day in another group setting. The majority associate this fact with the children being "nervous", "tense", "hyperactive" and excited, whereas a few of them describe these children as smiling and self-confident.

Seen from the perspective of individual development, teachers perceive day care children as having a positive self-image, expressed by a general state of well being. It is reflected in the children's autonomous behavior, their ability to take initiative and to make their own choices and to assume responsibilities.

As for the relationship between day care children and the teacher, a large majority noted that although these children maintain relative physical proximity to the teacher they only ask for help after unsuccessful trials. Teachers seem to consider that these children have numerous interactions with peers which allow them to enhance their social competence. They are very involved both in affiliative and conflictual behaviors. They assume an important role in leadership and they may also collaborate constructively in resolving social conflicts. But, these rather positive comments are tempered by the teacher's disapproval of the level of aggression displayed by the day care children towards their peers.

In summary, this study stresses the fact that though teachers perceive some advantages for the child coming from day care services, they point out that these children create a degree of disturbance in their daily work. Since the situation of encountering more and more

heterogeneous group composition is now irreversible in most urban schools, it is crucial to look at ways of facilitating communication between child care staff, school systems and families in order to avoid possible stigmas associated with the value of early group experiences. Present knowledge of the importance of quality programs emphasize the need for a closer relationship between kindergarten and child care services through common staff development support systems. Thus a better understanding of their complementary roles may allow the establishment of a smooth transition from one milieu to another.

Summary

The studies on the effects of day care quality which are reviewed in this chapter make it necessary to bear in mind that day care experience acts in conjunction with many variables such as family background and the attitudes of kindergarten teachers. Research on the interaction of family and day care experiences, as well as on the attitudes of kindergarten teachers have facilitated our understanding of the relationship between child care quality and transition to kindergarten.

The case of transition from day care to kindergarten depends upon the continuity between the various environments that preschoolers are exposed to during their childhood. It is possible now to state that high quality day care experience may facilitate transition, while poor quality day care experience may prepare the child to anticipate a similar experience in kindergarten and therefore set a rather negative attitude towards school learning.

High quality programs offering developmentally appropriate environments, where the staff, the activities, the materials and the whole environment stimulate curiosity and interaction among children are at present essential criteria. Finally, the need to merge "care" with "education" requires systematic and regular communication among caregivers, educators and parents. However, this concept implies an offical recognition of the need to facilitate transition, as well as creative participation in the process. This can occur only if there is a willingness on the part of the principal participants (teachers, caregivers and parents) to act in this manner and if those in positions of authority (government officials, school and day care administrators) to support the need for high quality care and cooperation.

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